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STATE FOR NEA/MAG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/19/2019  
TAGS: [MO](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#)  
SUBJECT: PALACE PREVENTS ISLAMIST PARTY FROM TAKING  
MAYORALTY OF OUJDA

REF: A. 09 RABAT 435  
[B](#). 09 RABAT 607  
[C](#). 09 RABAT 431

Classified By: CG Elisabeth Millard for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1 (C) SUMMARY: The following provides new details on the incidents initially reported in Ref B concerning the recent intervention by Moroccan authorities in the selection of the mayor in Oujda. Despite winning the plurality of votes in the June municipal elections in Oujda, the regional capitol of Eastern Morocco, the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) was prevented by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) from forming a coalition that would have given it control of the presidency of the city council. The MOI, allegedly at the behest of the Royal Palace, used harassment, intimidation, and procedural rules against the PJD and its political allies, which culminated in a violent confrontation and serious injuries to a leading PJD figure. The ensuing drama provoked the intervention of the French Ambassador, and a charge of "terrorism" by national party leaders. The incident demonstrates the extent to which the Government of Morocco (GOM) was willing to go to prevent the PJD from taking power in a region with significant government investment that is considered to be strategically sensitive. END SUMMARY.

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Election Math: Counting to 33  
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[2](#). (U) Oujda, a city of nearly half a million inhabitants, is the regional capital of the Eastern Province and sits 14 kilometers from Algeria. Despite the closure of the border in 1994, the markets in Oujda remain full of cheap smuggled gasoline and foodstuffs from Algeria. (Ref. A). There are 400,000 eligible voters in Oujda of whom 220,000 were registered for the 2009 municipal elections. The final tally of votes cast was 50,000 (a 23 percent participation rate) of which nearly 14,000 were invalidated for improper marking. The city council consists of 59 regular council seats plus an additional six for the newly created women's list. The 65 council members elect the mayor. The elections resulted in the following distribution: the PJD 21 seats, the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) 16 seats, the Popular Movement (MP) 14, the Istiqlal Party 13, and Rally of National Independents (RNI) with one.

[3](#). (C) Zahreddine Taybi, the editor-in-chief of the Oujda-based weekly newspaper Al Hadath Ach Charki (Eastern Events), recently told poloff that the PJD

began discussion with Istiqlal to form a coalition but negotiations quickly broke down over Istiqlal's insistence that its candidate Omar Hejira, brother to the current Minister of Housing Ahmed Toufiq Hejira, be given the presidency (i.e., mayor's slot). When the council met for the first round of negotiations on June 25, the PJD had managed to convince 7 of the 14 Popular Movement Party (MP) Representatives to support their candidate along with 3 members of Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) and the sole RNI representative, Rachida Ismaili. This coalition brought the PJD's total to 32 and hence one vote short of the majority they would need to control the council. Taybi claimed that the MOI was closely following the negotiations and had barred journalists and the public from attending. When the PJD was one vote short, the representative of the Wali abruptly adjourned the proceedings on the grounds that a majority had not been reached.

14. (C) According to Taybi, the Government of Morocco (GOM) and the PAM and MP party leadership of the members who had defected began pressuring the members to withdraw support from a PJD coalition. While PAM members asserted to other party members in a low profile manner the King's alleged preference for a PAM-led coalition, the representatives from the MP and RNI that supported the PJD coalition complained to the press of intimidation, harassment, and pressure from the security forces. Taybi reported an incident whereby the police raided the residence of PJD council member Abdelaziz Aftati

while he hosted the dissident MP and PAM members and initially accused him of forcibly kidnapping council members.

15. (C) Meanwhile, the national party leaders including the Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi from Istiqlal, Abdelillah Benkirane from the PJD, and Mohammed Cheikh Biadillah from PAM, all traveled to Oujda in the hope of resolving the dispute in their favor. PAM and Istiqlal brokered a deal along with the other 7 MP members to form a coalition that would exclude the PJD from power and seat Omar Hejira as the council's president.

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You Can't Have an Islamist-free Election without  
Breaking Some Heads  
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16. (C) On June 29, the city council met for a second time and the Istiqlal/PAM/MP coalition successfully created a majority. The PJD members became very upset and stormed out of the building shouting and protesting the surprise outcome. Outside, the police had already erected barricades around the municipal building. In the ensuing confrontation, a number of people were injured including Boubker Nourredine, a high ranking PJD member and a lawyer, who Taybi reported was struck on the head by a police baton. Nourredine suffered a fractured skull and had to have emergency surgery that evening. In spent three days in a coma while in the intensive care section of the local hospital. In Addition, other members, including a female delegate from the PJD, were injured less gravely and temporarily detained.

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French Intervention  
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17. (C) In response to the attack, the PJD's Aftati sent a letter to the French Ambassador in Rabat asking the French government to intervene to provide

medical care for Nourredine and his family. Nourredine is a French national by his birth in Algeria prior to Algerian independence. Taybi alleged that the French Ambassador contacted Minister of Interior Chakib Benmoussa to demand an explanation as to the events and injury. The MOI subsequently issued a statement accusing, "certain foreign powers of interfering in internal affairs of Morocco." The line was picked up by other political parties and Aftati was roundly pilloried by the media for his alleged "treason" by appealing to Morocco's former colonial master. Shortly thereafter Benkirane announced that Aftati had resigned from the PJD.

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The Aftermath  
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¶8. (C) Omar Hejira has assumed his position as the new mayor and contacts in Oujda report the situation is calm. The seven dissident members of the MP, including Fadwa Manouni, were expelled from their party. Aftati may have resigned from the PJD but to date has not resigned his seat on the city council. Nourredine awoke from his coma and is recuperating. In an interview with a Moroccan daily, he said that on the advice of PJD Party Chief Benkirane, he would be bringing a civil suit against the governor's office in Oujda.

¶9. (C) Taybi and other interlocutors were not surprised by the intervention of the MOI into the elections but criticized the "awkward way" the government mishandled the matter. Mohammed Amarti, a professor at Mohammed I University in Oujda and a local member of the human rights organization OMDH, voiced the conventional wisdom that Oujda was too important for the Makhzen to allow the PJD to control. On the one hand, Amarti said, the government has poured significant investment into Oujda since 2003, especially major tourist developments planned for the Mediterranean coast (Ref C). Imagine an Islamist party that wants to limit alcohol consumption and encourage modest dress controlling tourist resorts, he said. He also added

that the GOM is concerned about the security of its border with Algeria and possible infiltration of arms and salafist terrorists.

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COMMENT  
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¶10. (C) Morocco deserves praise in general for the transparency of its elections were held in 2007 and ¶2009. However, the security forces direct and violent intervention into the formation of Oujda's city council coalitions shows that the Palace is still intent on tightly controlling the eventual outcome of elections. While numerous political interlocutors, including from the GOM, like to paint the PJD as an "Islamist bogeyman" that cannot be trusted with the security of the state, there is little evidence from the PJD's control of small cities and minor towns to support this argument. A more likely explanation is that the PJD is the one party the Palace does not adequately control, given its significant patrician support and ability to mobilize the population - as evidenced in the massive protests against the situation in Gaza late last year.

¶11. This message was coordinated with Embassy Rabat.

MILLARD